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Questions for Regina's Public School Trustees

January 15, 2008

INTRODUCTION

RealRenewal is a coalition of parents and community members concerned about the future of public education in Regina. Faced with tough educational choices, we promote the full and fair evaluation of all alternatives.

In particular, the consideration of the closure or merger of schools is a very grave matter. Such decisions irrevocably change the educational environment for pupils. The communities surrounding the schools are also forever changed. Once a school is gone, it is gone, and the fabric of our city will never be the same.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the United States, where the closure and merger of schools was followed by lower academic achievement, increased school violence and a growing disconnect between school and community. These negative outcomes are consistent and well documented in hundreds of locations where mergers occurred (Cotton 2001, 1-4; Bailey 2000 1-5; Schmidt, Murray and Nguyen 2007, 60; Wasley and Lear 2001, 22).

As a result, school districts across the U.S. today face significant challenges as they struggle to recreate the pattern of smaller neighbourhood schools of the past. Chicago has targeted the development of high schools of no more than 500 students, and elementary schools of no more than 350 (Chicago Public Schools 2007). New York is in the midst of a process of breaking up its large high schools into schools of 300-600 students. These are just two examples of the neighbourhood school revival.

The fruits are clear: already New York's 47 converted schools register significantly higher graduation rates than the city's larger schools (Pytel 2006). But the challenges are many. One of the first barriers is the permanent loss of former schools buildings, replaced by condos and strip malls. Districts like Chicago and Portland face the prospect of rebuilding. In New York, administrators have been forced to build 'schools within schools,' literally dividing up the former mega-school buildings (Pytel 2006). The results are mixed, falling short of the ideal of neighbourhood schools. Other districts face the challenge of convincing school administrators to give up their large-scale domains (Cotton 2001, 48). In all cases, turning back the clock is a highly difficult task that doubtless leaves many school administrators and taxpayers wishing they had never created larger schools in the first place.

This experience suggests that no school should be merged or closed without very serious research into the long term implications. In some other jurisdictions, this is a matter of legislation. Ontario's Education Act, for example allows a full

review of the impacts before a school is closed (Appendix A). The Education Ministry's *Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines* state:

...school boards are required to develop a generic School Valuation Framework that assesses each of the following four considerations about the school(s) being reviewed:

- Value to the student
- Value to the community
- Value to the school board
- Value to the local economy

(Ontario Ministry of Education 2006)

The guidelines further state: "The assessment is to weigh the value of the school(s) to the student above the other considerations" (Ontario Ministry of Education 2006). The valuation markers cover a wide variety of socio-economic factors, ranging from student academic outcomes to the school's provision of open space within a community.

A joint board-community Accommodation Review Committee is tasked with overseeing the assessment, ensuring full public access to all related documents, and inviting public input. Of note, the Committee's guidelines include a requirement of 60 days' notice before public meetings commence, to ensure the public has adequate time to review the documents and prepare responses.

Saskatchewan does not offer such legislative protection of the rights of students and communities faced with major changes to their schools. Therefore we are very grateful to have this opportunity – however limited – to put forward a few of our many questions about the School Board's plans. Although the Board is not bound by legislation to carry out a full valuation of schools, we urge the Trustees to nonetheless demand a very high standard of targeted investigation before any school is closed.

We acknowledge our Trustees share our understanding of the gravity of the decisions at hand, and we thank them in advance for studying and answering these written questions.

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BOARD PROCESS FOR SCHOOL CLOSURES

- Have you conducted a facility evaluation study for Herchmer? Is so, we would like to review it as soon as possible.
- What date will the results of the surveys that you are taking be made public?
- When taking your decisions to close schools in Regina, with which specific organizations have you consulted? At what date will the details of these consultations be made public?
- As you developed your proposal to close schools in Regina, did you consult with students? If not, why not? If so, how did you go about this consultation?
- What are the guiding principles of the Renewal plan? How will progress on these principles be measured?
- We are curious to know how you define your role as School Trustees. Who do you ultimately serve in the community?

POPULATION

- What is the source for the front end population data that you've been using to make your decisions to close schools? How have you adjusted for the in-migration of some 10,000 Saskatchewan residents?
- As the actual enrolment at Herchmer and other schools slated for closure appears to be higher than the enrolment numbers stated in your Renewal document, can you please clarify how and when the enrolment numbers that helped form the basis of your proposals were collected?
- What are the enrolment figures as of January 2008 for each school? Will you update your Renewal plan document accordingly?
- Further to this, how have you adjusted your projections to accommodate reported population growth in Regina, including tracking the resultant changes to neighbourhood demographics?

- What, if any, particular attention have you paid to First Nations school-aged population growth?
- What percentage of the total Regina public student population attends schools slated for potential closure? What percentage of these students are First Nations, compared to their representation in the total school population?

BUSING ISSUES

- Since many more students will not be able to walk the distances to the proposed school locations, and will be required to take buses to school, what happens when they are late and miss the bus? In particular, have you considered the implications of this problem for low income and at-risk families?
- We understand there is an acute shortage of bus drivers. What plans are in place to find enough qualified bus drivers? This is a safety issue for us.
- What plans have you made to ensure that students who wish to participate in extra- mural activities may do so when they rely on busing to get home?

FINANCIAL CONCERNS

- With school closures and busing of students out of their local communities, we expect that many students will leave the public school system. Have you taken into consideration the potential loss of public school taxes? If so, what is the projected dollar amount?
- With no schools in the local community areas, have you calculated the loss of volunteer hours from parents and neighbours? Have you calculated the loss of donations from local businesses? If so, what is the projected dollar equivalency?
- Within neighbourhoods that have reduced services, how have you planned to reduce taxes for inequitable access?

SOCIAL IMPACTS

- Are your decisions to close schools based mostly on financial concerns? If so, what is the dollar value that can be estimated for:
 - lower graduation rates
 - poorer academic achievement
 - children who are alone after school
 - isolation of children who have lost their local social network
 - safety issues

- school violence
- economic disparity and resulting peer pressures

IMPACTS OF SCHOOL CLOSURES ON:

FABRIC OF COMMUNITY

- Over the years we have been able to forge important relationships in the community. How will you accommodate for the losses of our vital community partnerships?
- One of our community programs feeds our children a wholesome meal at lunch. In your plans, who will feed the children?
- Looking at these decisions from a strategic point of view, how do they fit into the City and the Provincial initiatives for building strong and healthy communities?
- Since the Herchmer School serves mostly First Nations students, we would like to review your studies on the impacts of the school closure on the First Nations students, their families and the inner city community it serves.
- Since schools rely on parents to volunteer, how will you assist those without cars to participate in social and volunteer activities that occur at the school that would be out of the local neighbourhood?
- What do you see for the future of community schools? Since we parents value them so highly, if you are making plans to phase them out, we would like to see the studies that provided information that would lead to your decisions - as soon as possible.

COMMUNITY HERITAGE

- Have you valued the historical significance of the school buildings that you are planning to close?
- Have you consulted with Heritage Regina about the closures and the future of these historic buildings?

SOCIAL AND HEALTH

- Herchmer's pupils will be missing a valuable meal every day. How do you value this? How will you compensate for this health loss?

- Children want and need to be involved in after-school activities for their well-being. How do you plan to accommodate these needs for those who are not near their homes?
- Have you performed studies into the socio-economic impacts in the communities where you plan to close one of their most important institutions? If so, we would like to review them as soon as possible.
- What studies have you done on the social and physical and emotional health impacts on students whose schools have been closed? We would like to review them as soon as possible.

ENVIRONMENT

- Have you conducted an environmental impact study on the closure of schools including, among others concerns, the reliance of fossil fuels to transport children? Is so, we would like to review that study as soon as possible.

EDUCATION STANDARDS FOR OUR CHILDREN

We believe education standards and community well being are as important as economic concerns when making important decisions like school closures.

- We feel that if confronted with greater travel distances to French programs, many parents will withdraw their children from learning this important language. In closing schools with French Immersion how have you calculated the global implications to the French program?
- There is a broad research consensus supporting the value of smaller (rather than larger) schools in improving standards for education and school environment including the following:
 - student safety
 - emotional stability of students
 - engagement and attendance
 - academic achievement and literacy
 - graduation rates

Beyond your contracted literature review, have you obtained and studied primary research reports and case studies? Have you taken these studies into consideration when you have made decisions to close schools in Regina and consolidate?

- You have publicly stated that 'smaller is relative,' however this seems to contradict current research findings, which do not as a rule introduce the concept of relativity. Beyond the conclusion of your own contracted

literature review, can you please clarify your research basis for this statement?

COST IMPLICATIONS

- In the case of Herchmer School, have you done a complete detailed projected cost accounting of renovation versus closure, transportation and rebuilding? If so, what are the actual dollar savings, if any, to be realized?
- What are the total projected actual savings to the taxpayer, if any, to be realized from the 10-year renewal plan?
- In devising the plan, please state the order in which you ranked the importance of: 1) retiring the accumulated facilities deficit; 2) improving the measurable academic achievement of students.

THE FINANCIAL PLAN

- Why does the School Board not post complete budgets, financial statements and planning documents on line? Why does the Board require that the public must sign out these documents at the School Board office?
- What is the basis for the total capital expense estimate set out in the plan?
- Given recent cost inflation in Western Canada for construction, what confidence does the Regina Public School Board have in this cost projection? Does it have 3rd party support for the estimate? What are the plans for mitigating the risk of contract inflation?
- What is the impact of rising fuels cost on the cost of busing students?
- What is the total estimated cost of deferred maintenance for the system as a whole?
- How much of the total forecast operational savings are comprised of deferred maintenance costs?
- How is cost for deferred maintenance obligations calculated? When was the most recent calculation done?
- The document states that 44 per cent of facility requirement will be addressed by the renewal plan. How much deferred maintenance will be outstanding when the plan is complete?
- Does the Board have an appraisal for the land value of the schools they propose to lose? If so, what is the current appraisal?

- The Provincial Auditor recommends the use of performance planning for publically funded institutions. Does the Board have performance plans, indicators and measures in place to assess the success of the renewal plan, and how does it plan to report to the public as the plan proceeds?

FINALLY

- When can we expect answers to these questions?

CONCLUSION

Thank you for this important opportunity to put forth our questions. We hope you understand that we do not think school Trustees are bad people. We know you are good, caring people motivated by the wish to do the right thing for Regina students and their families.

However we are deeply concerned that you have been placed in the position of being expected to undertake seriously consequential decisions without an adequate level of information to guide these decisions.

We do not believe you have been provided with the necessary background research and planning tools to move forward with full knowledge of the either the current landscape or the long term consequences.

We are concerned that the school administration has approached the issues raised in 2005 as primarily a public relations problem, and that their work in the intervening years has been focused mainly on how to “sell” school closures and bolster their position. However, as you can discern from our questions, the issues raised by parents are much deeper and broader than a public relations problem. Many of the questions and concerns raised in 2005 remain unanswered to this day.

As Trustees of public funds, it is your task to ensure school administrators are practicing due diligence in providing the public and its trustees with the information we need to make important democratic decisions together.

RealRenewal hopes our questions will be helpful in beginning this process. We urge you to take no further action on school closures until these questions are fully answered and all relevant information is made fully public.

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